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FALSTAFF AND HIS FOREBEARS

BY JAMES MONAGHAN

I

In the following pages Shakespeare is revealed in the act (caught in the act!) of composing the plays of *Henry IV* and *Henry V*—probably, near the scene of his earliest triumphs, in the house of the recently arrived French emigrant and wig-maker, Christopher Mountjoy, at the northeast corner of Monkwell (Mugle) and Silver Streets, not far from Cripplegate, London. In this neighborhood also dwelt Shakespeare's friends Ben Jonson, Thomas Dekker, John Heming and Henry Condell, the latter two, fellow actors, remembered in his will and first editors of his plays, and, lastly, Richard Tarlton, who plays a prominent part in this paper. Outside the walls, beyond Cripplegate, were the Curtain and Theatre, the earliest play-houses of London, where Shakespeare began his career on the stage, first in some humble capacity, it may be as prompter's assistant or call boy, later no doubt taking part in interludes and extemporized plays, afterwards as play-cobbler, in collaboration with others, and finally as full-fledged author and dramatist, in which latter capacity he appears in these pages.

The primary purpose of the writer is to solve the problem, which has puzzled many generations of students, whether the unrivalled and amazing Falstaff was the pure invention of the poet's brain or whether he was drawn from a model.

Shakespeare's text has been examined so minutely, all its sources have been investigated with such painstaking—often painful—care, and the assertion that no model of Falstaff exists has been made so repeatedly by scholars that it will probably surprise the reader to be told that the very drama, which contains the prototype for the poet's immortal jester, can be pointed out. It will be shown, in addition, that Shakespeare developed the personality as outlined in this rather remarkable old chronicle play—remarkable certainly for the inspiration it gave the master poet of the world—and that he kept his finger on the lines, copying many incidents and numerous phrases. So much can be stated with absolute confi-

dence. It is also believed there can be established a more than plausible theory of the way the poet's attention was drawn to the character and why his imagination was kindled.

It is well known that Shakespeare's plays of *Henry IV* and *Henry V* were founded largely on the old chronicle drama of the *Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth, containing the Honorable Battle of Agincourt*. The historical part of the old drama furnishes the crude outlines of *Henry V*. It closes with the surrender of the French army and the courtship and betrothal of Henry and Katherine. Our interest lies chiefly with *Henry IV* where indebtedness to the old play is much greater. In the chronicle drama the exploits of Prince Hal and his roystering companions and the comedy situations, discussed later, are set out with many details—not followed closely by Shakespeare, one merely suggesting the other. In both there is the robbery at Gadshill, in the neighborhood of London; the adjournment to the tavern of Eastcheap to spend the spoils; and the sudden interruption of the revels by the sheriff and his officers. In the old drama there is a trial before the Chief Justice when the Prince gives him the historic box on the ear, which has sounded through the centuries, only mentioned by Falstaff. In both plays there is an impressment of soldiers, numerous comedy situations in the camps, and finally, when Prince Hal has succeeded to the crown, his riotous companions are rather ungraciously banished, "on pain of death," not to come near him "by ten mile," but with vague promise of advancement, "if he hears well of them." From these slender threads the great dramatist has woven his matchless fabric of comedy.

Scholars all agree that hints of the comic action of Shakespeare's characters are to be found in the old play, but as careful a student as Halliwell-Phillipps says the real prototype of Falstaff "certainly does not belong to the *Famous Victories*." Many later critics have reiterated his false pronouncement. Such a misstatement can be explained only by the fact that Sir John Oldcastle of the earlier play occupies the same relation to the Prince that Falstaff does in *Henry IV*, and therefore would naturally be considered the prototype, while the clown, the real original of Falstaff, escaped notice because he is not a companion of the Prince and plays his part with a different setting. In truth, Falstaff is a composite of the two—*et aliorum*. In the old drama several speeches by Sir

John Oldcastle—showing the acknowledged coward and bombastic comedian—were probably enough to suggest to the poet the creation of a comic companion for the prince. But Derrick, the clown of the old play, is undoubtedly the original of Falstaff, as will appear by a comparison of the two plays, where it will be seen the two jesters are cast in the same mould.

When Shakespeare, in his study, opened the volume to read the old play, his eye was met by Prince Henry's call: "Come away, my lads." In *Henry IV*, as the Prince and Falstaff enter, the latter exclaims: "Hal, what time of day is it, lad?" Is it too fanciful to suggest that this last word may have acted as a tuning-fork for the poet's sensitive ear to give the pitch to the scenes that follow? At least, the verbal echoes, scattered through these plays, show how closely he scanned the text. Let us consider some of them. Derrick said to one of his companions in arms in France: "Be hanged in thy own language." Prince Hal says: "I can drink with any tinker in his own language." Again Derrick said: "I have brought two shirts with me." Falstaff: "I take but two shirts out with me," although, as he reports, there was not a shirt and a half in all his ragged company. Falstaff says: "I forgive thee. . . . Thou seest I am pacified." Derrick: "I am quickly pacified. . . . 'Tis a wonderful thing to see how glad the knave is now I have forgiven him." Falstaff twice uses the italicized phrase in the same exaggerated sense. Derrick, in recounting his military exploits, said: "I was called the bloody soldier amongst them all." Falstaff, Davy's "man of war," says: "I would to God my name were not so terrible to the enemy." John Cobbler's rhyme, recited to Derrick,

"With nut brown ale
That is full stale,"

finds a parallel in Silence's song to Falstaff:

"A cup of wine
That's brisk and fine."

Probably the most striking illustration of the verbal echoes of the two characters is the oath which is so often in the mouths of both men. In the old play, Prince Henry and his roystering companions, including Sir John Oldcastle, frequently use the expression "Gogs wounds," the equivalent of "God's wounds," one of Queen Bess's royal expletives, while the oath constantly on Der-

rick's tongue is the more common and abbreviated "sounds." When we turn to Falstaff, we find that (in addition to the "tut-tut," made famous by President Wilson) "zounds" is his special oath. So often does he use it that it has attracted the attention of critics, and Fleay suggests it must have been interpolated in the text by some actor. Without questioning the correctness of Fleay's surmise, the more obvious explanation is that Shakespeare took it from Derrick, it may be unconsciously, in his development of the character of Falstaff.

We find similar parallels in the old play and *Henry V*. When in the former the Dauphin sends a present to the English King of a "tun of tennis balls" to express his contempt for an English warrior, the King says: "My lord Prince Dolphin is very pleasant with me, but tell him that, instead of balls of leather, we will toss him balls of brass and iron." Shakespeare, on the same occasion, makes King Henry say: "We are glad the Dauphin is so pleasant with us. . . . And tell the pleasant Prince this mock of his hath turned his balls to gun-stones." In dismissing the messenger, the King says in the old play: "Deliver him our safe conduct"; and, in the new, "Convey them with safe conduct."

Remembering that Shakespeare's study was probably in the Mountjoy house, we may quote Professor Wallace: "As you read *Henry V* you see Shakespeare, now in the midst of the Mountjoy family, now with some member of it [especially Mary, for whom he negotiated a husband], exchanging lessons in French and English, which serve as prototypes for the charming efforts of Katherine and Alice and Henry." Only a few lines can be given to show the way the material of the old play was worked over and the French lessons utilized. In the *Famous Victories* King Henry says: "But tell me, sweet Kate, canst thou tell how to love?" Then again: "Tush, Kate, but tell me in plain terms, canst thou love the King of England? I cannot do as these countries do that spend half their time in wooing." Katherine answers: "How should I love him that hath dealt so hardly with my father?" And again: "If I were of my own direction I could give you answer: but seeing I stand at my father's direction I must first know his will." In *Henry V* the King asks bluntly: "Do you like me, Kate?" Katherine: "Pardonnez-moi, I cannot tell vat is 'like me.'" King Henry: "An angel is like you, Kate, and

you are like an angel." Later he says: "And while thou livest, dear Kate, take a fellow of plain and uncoined constancy, for he perforce must do thee right, because he hath not the gift to woo in other places; for these fellows of infinite tongue that can rhyme themselves into ladies' favors, they do always reason themselves out again." Katherine answers, substantially as in the old play: "Is it possible dat I sould love de enemy of France?" To Henry's final "Wilt thou have me?" Katherine answers: "Dat is as it sall please de roi mon père." King Henry: "Nay, it will please him well, Kate; it shall please him, Kate." Katherine: "Den it sall also content me."

We have seen how closely Shakespeare studied the old play in composing both *Henry IV* and *Henry V* and how in *Henry IV* Derrick's phrases reappear in Falstaff's "throng of words." Parallel incidents in the lives of both jesters may also be noted. Derrick, it seems, lives with John, the cobbler, drinks his ale, "eats him out of doors" and quarrels with his wife, while Falstaff takes his ease in his inn, quarrels with his hostess, and "eats [but especially drinks] her out of house and home," as he puts "all her substance into that fat belly of his."

While the scenes of the impressment of soldiers in both plays have few if any points in common, it is apparent that Shakespeare took the idea from the older play, where, significantly enough, Derrick supplies the comic element.

Falstaff's "eleven buckram men grown out of two," may have been suggested, in its extravagance at least, by Derrick's remark that he was four or five times slain. This scene in both dramas contains identical tricks in playing the part of the bloody soldier. Derrick said that every day when he went into the field he would take a straw and thrust it into his nose and make his nose bleed so that when the captain saw him he would say "Peace, a bloody soldier," and bid him stand aside. Falstaff improved on this, for while he hacked his own sword with his dagger, he persuaded his companions "to tickle *their* noses with speargrass to make them bleed."

Still another piece of by-play was taken bodily by Shakespeare from the old play. Derrick and John Cobbler witnessed the scene where Hal gave the Chief Justice a box on the ear, and they were so diverted by it that Derrick says to John: "Thou shalt be my

Lord Chief Justice, and thou shalt sit in the *chair* and I'll be the young Prince, and hit thee a box on the ear," and the scene is re-enacted by the clowns. This episode in the old play gives rise to the delicious bantering between Prince Hal and Falstaff, where Falstaff first and Hal afterwards impersonate the King, with the *chair* for his state, the dagger for his scepter and the cushion for his crown.

Having shown that the lives of Falstaff and Derrick run in parallel lines to the extent of identical situations and incidents, and similar turns of speech, to the point of Falstaff's 'damnable iteration,' in plays that portray the same scenes, it may be said that the much more important element of identity of character is also found. A superficial examination of the two plays will show that in each we have a swaggering soldier, in service against his will, aggressive when his enemies are unarmed and running away when they are armed; in each he is a coward, braggart, glutton, thief, rogue, clown and parasite; in each he has the same monumental unblushing effrontery and loves a jest even at his own expense.

II

The theory, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, of the way the poet's attention was arrested by the old play, and why it dwelt in his memory, remains to be developed.

Early in 1583, a company of actors, known as the Queen's Players, was organized, and Richard Tarlton, a special favorite of the Queen, was selected as the manager. Some three or four years later, when Shakespeare went to London, that city was convulsed with laughter by this actor. There are few names in the whole circle of Elizabethan literature so frequently mentioned, says Halliwell-Phillipps. Nash asserts in *Pierce Penniless*: "The people began exceedingly to laugh when Tarlton first peeped out his head." His memory "was cherished with delight" for a hundred years, and—hall-mark of fame—his portait served as the sign of an ale-house at late as 1798.

It was particularly as a clownish comedian that Tarlton won his enormous reputation. Baker, in his *Chronicles*, puts it rather strongly when he states that Tarlton, "for the clown's part, never had his match, never will have." It must be recollected, to follow Halliwell-Phillipps, that the clown was a much more important

and privileged person in Tarlton's day than in our own. He not only entered on the stage at stated intervals, but continually mixed with the company, and attempted to excite merriment by any species of buffoonery that occurred to him, and frequently entered into a contest of raillery and sarcasm with some of the audience. This practise had grown to such an extent in Shakespeare's time that he protested, in the words of Hamlet: 'Let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them.' So famous was Tarlton for extemporizing that it gave rise to the Elizabethan word 'Tarltonizing.'

It has been suggested with great likelihood (Sidney Lee's *D. N. B.*) that, in Hamlet's eulogy on Yorick, Shakespeare embodied youthful remembrances of the great comedian. The time mentioned by the grave-digger, it is pointed out, agrees with the date of Tarlton's death. A part of the speech may be quoted to show its aptness to this conjecture. Gazing on the skull, Hamlet says: "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy; he hath borne me on his back a thousand times. . . . Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your jibes now? your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar?"

The facts of this conjecture, if they are correct, may have had an important bearing on Shakespeare's career, as well as on the details of this study. If this famous actor was on terms of intimacy with the precocious youth of Stratford, in his most impressionable years, the latter would prove an apt pupil, and it would help to explain how he rose so rapidly in his profession. When we recall that Shakespeare's father as high-bailiff or mayor of Stratford was the first to license players there, that the initial performance was usually a free entertainment, called the mayor's play, and that these theatrical performances were continued with increasing frequency from year to year until Shakespeare went to London, it would be strange indeed if he did not know many of the players. It is on record that in 1587 Tarlton's Queen's Players visited Stratford-on-Avon, as did two other leading companies. It is more than likely, as Professor Baynes suggests, that these associations helped to decide the career of young Shakespeare, and, it may be added, to equip him for his brilliant dramatic achievements.

The important thing, in our present study, is that, when Shakespeare went to London, Tarlton, the great comedian, with his inimitable drollery and wealth of improvisation, was acting the part of Derrick, the clown, in the old play which we have been considering. In Tarlton's hands Derrick must have been amusing beyond any conception we can form from the printed page. It is inconceivable that Shakespeare did not witness him in this famous role, or that, having heard him, he should ever forget it.

One of Tarlton's interpolations in the character of Derrick has been preserved. In *Tarlton's Jests* published in Shakespeare's time, is this "excellent jest of Tarlton's suddenly spoken": "At the Bull of Bishopsgate [a theatre near Cripplegate] was a play of *Henry the Fifth* [the *Famous Victories*] wherein the judge was to take a box on the ear; and because he was absent that should take the blow, Tarlton himself, ever forward to please, took upon him to play the same judge beside his part of the clown: and Knel, then playing Henry the Fifth, hit Tarlton a sound box indeed, which made the people laugh the more because it was he; but anon the judge goes in, and immediately Tarlton in his clown's cloathes comes out and asks the actors, 'What news?' 'O,' saith one, 'hadst thou been here thou shouldst have seen Prince Henry hit the judge a terrible box on the ear.' 'What, man,' said Tarlton, 'strike a judge?' 'It is true, yfaith,' said the other. 'No other like?' said Tarlton, 'and it could not but be terrible to the judge when the report so terrifies me that me thinks the blow remains still on my cheek, that it burns again.' The people laughed at this mightily; and to this day I have heard it commended for rare; but no marvel, for he had many of these."

From this little jest (though surely not "suddenly spoken"), and from other contemporary evidence here given, it seems fair to assume that the clown of the old play was the mere skeleton of Tarlton's clown, as of Shakespeare's Falstaff; and this, by the way, may reconcile the different suggestions given above concerning "zounds" in the two plays, as the oath of Tarlton (Fleay's actor?) in the character of Derrick may have crept into the text of the old drama. It is not at all improbable,—but this is only conjecture,—that Tarlton's striking impersonation may have entered largely into Shakespeare's development of the character. What we know, as shown above, is that Shakespeare found the prototype of Fal-

staff in the well-marked characteristics of Derrick, the clown, that he grafted these on Sir John Oldcastle, and that they grew, under his magic hand, and developed into the greatest jester of all time, the immortal Falstaff.

Philadelphia.
